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ABSTRACT

American Indian children come from a cultural background and tradition that is quite different from that of the dominant society in America. These differences can cause varying degrees of confusion and conflict for Indian people, and these problems surface as soon as an Indian child begins his formal education, especially if the school is staffed predominantly by non-Indians, and the educational philosophy follows dominant society guidelines. Increased cultural sensitivity and awareness on the part of educators is necessary if the cultural conflict felt by Indian children is to be lessened, and their educational experiences become meaningful and positive. Administrators, teachers, and support personnel can help the Indian child understand and cope with cultural conflicts experienced in school. In order to do this, all school personnel must be sensitized and attuned to the child's culture and to their own through inservices and workshops. More culturally sensitive school systems can help in the minimization of culturally based problems and the school personnel will gain in personal understanding and growth. (Author/AN)

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Cultural Conflict:

The Indian Child in the Non-Indian Classroom

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Abstract

American Indian children come from a cultural background and tradition that is quite different from that of the dominant society in America. These differences can cause varying degrees of confusion and conflict for Indian people, and these problems surface as soon as an Indian child begins his formal education, especially if the school is staffed predominantly by non-Indians, and the educational philosophy follows dominant society guidelines. Increased cultural sensitivity and awareness on the part of educators is necessary if the cultural conflict felt by Indian children is to be lessened, and their educational experiences become meaningful and positive.

THE INDIAN CHILD IN THE NON-INDIAN CLASSROOM

In speaking about differences in cultures and cultural values and philosophies, we are speaking about differences in a way of life. We are not concerned with the external trappings that may or may not reflect a difference in one person's way of life compared to another's; whether an individual drives a pick-up truck or a Mercedes Benz is not the question. We need to be concerned with the internal differences between the Indian and the Anglo that may cause cultural conflicts for Indian people.

A person's way of life is extremely important to him; it is the basis for his very existence. One's way of life is comprised of techniques and skills, methods of communication, forms of relating, roles and social orders, methods for providing life's essentials, explanations of the immediate world and universe, taboos and rules, myths and legends, and the coping ability (Barry & Wolf, 1965, p. 10). All of these areas and more make up a person's way of life; they are learned from birth and become strongly internalized. They shape and limit, modify and encompass all a person thinks and does, and they exact strong emotional commitment. In light of this commitment, imagine the cultural conflict and cultural shock the Indian child feels when he is put into an educational environment where all he hears, sees, and experiences is another kind of culture that he not only is unfamiliar with, but that often is in opposition to his own culture. An Anglo child would undergo comparable culture conflict and

culture shock if he were placed in an environment that was equally as foreign to him (perhaps in a remote school on a reservation where the traditions would be very different from what he had been used to, and English was not spoken).

Results of Cultural Conflict

The American Indian child put into a school situation where little if anything is done to help him cope with cultural differences may react in a number of ways--all of which are usually misunderstood by the people in control; the non-Indian educators. The Indian child will undoubtedly be confused by the cultural differences, and by the reactions and attitudes of his peers. Anomie may result, and the Indian child may withdraw into himself and, if there are other Indian children around, he will seek them out for the only positive reinforcement and identification he can find.

In a few rare cases, the Indian child might rebel physically or verbally, but as this would be against his traditions (at least in most instances), there would undoubtedly be extenuating circumstances. If an Indian child chose to do something physical in response to his alienation, he would probably remove himself (run away) from the hostile school environment, rather than become violent.

It is also possible that the Indian child would begin token assimilation into the dominant society, but whether this assimilation would ever be total is questionable. Some anthropologists claim that an individual brought up in one society can never completely understand the values of

another society (Barry & Wolf, 1965, pp. 45-46). If this is valid, then complete assimilation would be virtually impossible for an Indian child confronted with both cultures. It is also doubtful that total assimilation will ever be possible in America as long as skin color remains so high on the list of criteria for acceptance into mainstream society.

The Indian child may exhibit any or all of the above responses to his school environment at one time or another, or he may find some way to "get by," and make it through the system with as little fuss as possible. In many instances the ability to "get by" will be only superficial and external; the Indian child will maintain his culture internally. According to Barry & Wolf (1965, p. 16), it is easier to adapt to external changes than to revamp one's internalization of culture and tradition. In the past, minority people have had to perfect this type of coping mechanism in order to survive in the dominant society, and since the dominant society seems unwilling to reassess its values and attitudes, minorities will have to continue to do so.

Cultural Differences

The American Indian's culture is very unique, and in many instances not particularly harmonious with the culture of the dominant society. Indian culture is steeped in tradition, and of great value and importance to Indian people. Although each tribe is different, and has traditions that are specific to that population, there are some general attitudes that can be found in many tribes. It is with these general attitudes and values that we will be concerned with here.

American Indians, for example, generally do not believe in drawing attention to themselves, especially through competition and aggression (Olson, 1971, p. 401). Since competitive and aggressive behavior are endemic to Anglo society, and taught and perpetuated in the schools, it is obvious that an Indian child will feel conflict in this area. It is morally conflicting, for example, for a Cherokee child to be called upon and singled out in class. Only when he represents a group can he feel comfortable in responding to the teacher's demands. It is offensive to the child to draw attention to himself and be aggressive, which he will have to do to satisfy the teacher (Wax, 1971, pp. 118-119). While this is a specific example pertaining to Cherokee culture, it is indicative of many Indian's beliefs regarding competition. When verbal answers are solicited from children in the classroom, the Anglo children will often rush to answer the question by raising their hands and frantically waving them. An Indian child may raise his hand to answer a question, but he will usually do so very quietly and almost apologetically.

Although the American Indian's interest in team sports is cited as an example of his competitiveness, it should be noted that team or group competition is acceptable, but in single competition recognition of the "winner" implies a negative attitude toward the "loser," and is not acceptable. Were teachers aware of this conflict, they could creatively structure their class participation exercises on a team basis rather than on spotlighting individual achievement, and thereby attempt to reach all pupils, not just the non-Indians. Indian children respond very well, for example, to spelling bees, team arithmetic games, and so on.

Another area of conflict between the two cultures deals with time. Many people cite "Indian time" as a clever way of saying Indian people aren't punctual and are inclined to be late: by minutes, hours, or even days. However, the cultural difference is greater than such a simple assumption might indicate. Indian people of a relatively traditional background do not look at time in the same way the dominant society does. The Anglo culture is much more time-oriented than the Indian culture. The Anglo also is very regimented and precise about time, and gets almost as upset if a person is early to a function as they do if that person is late. The Anglo culture is also very past and future oriented. When Indian people consider time, they look at the whole universe, not just at a piece of it and this may be confusing to the non-Indian (Ross & Brave Eagle, 1975, p. 6). In addition, many Indian people live in the eternal present, that is, the past goes back only as far as the eldest member of the community (Pelletier, 1971, p. 8).

This difference in attitudes toward time may cause the Indian child problems when he gets to school where time is almost revered. Children are punished if they are late for school, certain subjects are studied at certain times and at no other times, bells announce the time for recess, lunch, dismissal. School children are exhorted not to "waste time" (time cannot be wasted if learning is a continuous experience), and that wasted time has to be "made up" (the past cannot be made into the present), (Pelletier, 1971, p. 8)

An Indian child used to eating when he's hungry, resting when he's tired, and playing when he feels like it is going to be confused by bells and teachers telling him to eat his lunch, put his head on his desk for a nap, and to play only when he hears the right bell. Such regimentation is stifling, and not in keeping with Indian philosophy. The Anglo child on the other hand, because of his cultural orientation will probably have less trouble adjusting to this type of schedule than will the Indian child.

Indian people have a very special relationship to nature also: their respect and reverence of nature is well-known. Nature is not to be used and abused, it is not to be taken for granted or manipulated. It is to be used on a give and take basis, but with reverence; whenever something is taken from nature, something must be put back, and thanks given. Non-Indians tend to be apart from nature, and seem to want to place themselves above it. Although the non-Indian continually tries to master nature (a concept foreign to Indian people), he remains inharmonious with nature, and somewhat afraid of it (Pelletier, 1971, p. 9).

The Indian child who has been brought up in a culture that revolves around nature, and therefore has a traditional respect for nature, will be somewhat confused by the non-Indian's new-found ecology kick. He may also be puzzled and upset by people who have no respect for all aspects of nature, from the particles of sand in the desert, to the many species of animals that inhabit the planet. Social studies and biology classes that present nature as a conquered entity and man as the conqueror will be confusing and unacceptable to the Indian child. The Navajo child from the Four Corners area

who hears from his teachers and classmates all about the Anglo's respect for nature and land, and then remembers the mining operations going on back home, may rightly ask himself where the Anglo's respect has gone. The Indian's respect for the land is total, not governed by personal gain; it seems that many non-Indians respect land only when there is personal gain involved.

When Indian and non-Indian children go to school, they take with them attitudes toward authority that are widely diverse, and that have a definite affect on their performance in school. Schools are usually set up on an authoritarian basis, that is, the principal and the teachers have total authority over the pupils, and learning is teacher directed. Authoritarianism is generally not acceptable to an Indian child, as he has not been exposed to it as has his Anglo counterpart. Most Indian children who have been brought up traditionally are respected as thinking and feeling human beings capable of making choices. Their every move does not need to be controlled or directed. Anglo children tend to respect and accept the authority of the teacher automatically, and without question, simply because of the station of that person. This attitude does not necessarily hold true for the Indian child.

Cherokee children, for example, do not recognize authority as a valid category for interaction. The tradition of harmony is all-important to the Cherokee, and acceptance and respect follow if a person is in harmony with all around him. If a teacher has a harmonious relationship with his pupils and fulfills his moral obligation to them, they in turn, will have a moral

obligation to him, and will usually respond accordingly, with respect and acceptance. This respect will not be given simply because his role as teacher demands it, but because he has fulfilled the harmony ethic so important to the Cherokee (Wax, 1971, p. 124). Although this example is taken from Cherokee values, it is similar in many respects to the teachings of other tribes. Authoritarianism and the probing and imposition of opinion that often go along with it are generally not acceptable to Indian people, and respect is given an individual on merit, not because of his station or role in life (Chan & Hamley, 1975, p. 5).

The learning process is different in the two cultures also. Although teaching methodologies change, most learning in a typical school is teacher directed and controlled. Rote learning is, unfortunately, not a thing of the past. Too often little is done to help the pupils see the relationship of each subject or piece of learning to the whole; little is done to help the child tie all his learning experiences together. These ways of learning are not the Indian way. Indian children tend to learn through observation and self-discovery: they explore. They set their own pace, and enjoy learning and experiencing. Many Indian children learn better indirectly, through stories which require them to figure out the point rather than through the rote method or through the memorization of random facts. Perhaps because of the traditional relationship to the universe and nature, the Indian child sees things as a whole, not in fragments.

At least partially as a result of these differences, the Indian child may become bored with the non-creativity of the educational methods found

in many classrooms, and fail to participate in any manner acceptable to the teacher. He may not become hostile to the teacher and the idea of academics, but he will undoubtedly feel set apart or removed from classroom activities. The Indian child may become quiet and withdrawn, and seem to defer to the teacher and comply at least superficially, but this is usually a defense against teaching methodologies, the teacher's authoritarianism, and against his often intrusive attempts to get the Indian child involved (Wax, 1971, p. 120).

These are only a few of the traditional values that may cause the Indian child conflict when he attends an Anglo school. There are many other beliefs and attitudes that may also cause the children difficulties; each tribe has very special and unique traditions, and the Indian child has to live and function between both societies, Indian and Anglo, and maintain a cultural and personal identity.

Suggestions

What can be done to help the Indian child have a positive experience in the mainstream educational system? The responsibility for a child's education is shared by the school personnel, the child's parents, and the child himself, and wherever there are difficulties, steps should be taken to alleviate them.

Administrators, teachers, support staff, and especially counselors can do much to help an Indian child understand and cope with the cultural conflicts he will experience in a school setting. In order to do this,

school personnel must be sensitized and attuned to the child's culture and their own. Often the culturally aware school counselor can provide in-services and workshops that will allow the opportunity to develop cultural awareness. These inservices should not only include the teaching staff and administrators, but the school support personnel as well. Secretaries, nurses, cafeteria workers, and custodians all come into contact with children and need to be aware of the cultural differences that may cause the child some difficulties. If properly conducted, these training sessions should benefit not only the children indirectly, but the personnel directly; learning about another culture is an enriching and eye-opening experience. Perhaps one of the most important ideas that the counselor can help get across to all persons concerned, including the Indian child, is that to be culturally different does not mean to be culturally deficient, culturally disadvantaged, or culturally deprived (Biggs, Pulvino & Beck, 1976, p. 128).

The Indian child, in order to avoid a severe identity crisis, needs to have positive role models at home and in the schools. The counselor can help by assisting the people involved with the child to become aware of the Indian child's identity as a member of an ethnic group with strong and rich traditions that have played and continue to play an active and important part in the development and progress of this country.

In addition, the counselor needs to be aware that since counseling and guidance theories have tended to be aimed at the middle class and the upper middle class members of the mainstream society, he must have the sensitivity to adjust his thinking and techniques accordingly, when his

clients are not from those groups (Biggs, Pulvino & Beck, 1976, p. 126). Ideally, a good counselor should be able to communicate and help any person, regardless of their cultural background. However, in the case of less than ideal conditions, the counselor may need a little "inside information" if he is not Indian himself. He may need help in order to better understand the cultural differences and conflicts, and to be able to assist the child, parent, or school employee.

Indian parents also have voiced concerns and made suggestions about the education of their children. One concern that has been mentioned is that of lack of parental involvement and interaction with educational personnel. Although it can be said that this is in part the responsibility of the parent, such a pat answer does not address the total situation. Very often parents of Indian children are not comfortable in their dealings with schools. This discomfort is especially acute when Indian parents are monolingual or do not feel fluent in English. In addition, there is often very little effort made on the part of school staff to make home visits. These and other inhibiting factors lead to ineffective communication, and the Indian child suffers. It would therefore, be helpful if there were bilingual staff available to translate for monolingual parents, and if school staff made an effort to visit Indian homes and show an interest in the community. Such efforts, if handled sensitively, will usually be welcomed.

Indian parents have also suggested that there is a definite need for more Indian teachers, teacher's aides, and administrators. In many instances it is felt that the staff should come from the tribe receiving educational

aid, but when this is impossible, the preference is for Indian personnel rather than non-Indian staff. In the event that there are not enough qualified Indian people available to teach or assist in the teaching of Indian children, skilled, sensitive, aware, open-minded and caring non-Indians should be recruited.

Another suggestion made by Indian parents was that personnel be linguistically competent in the native language spoken by most of the Indian children in a class. In addition, the culture of the predominate tribe should be integrated into the curriculum, as should accurate history and information on Indian people.

These are but a few of the possibilities suggested by the parents of Indian children from different tribes. One of the most important ideas has not been mentioned: to show Indian children love and respect, understanding and concern, to share with them and trust them, will elicit results that we all would like to see.

As a final note, it should be understood that assimilation of the Indian child into the culture of the dominant society should not be the goal of the type of culturally sensitive education mentioned here. Quite the contrary, cultural traditions must be respected and maintained, and the Indian child needs to understand his own traditions as well as the values of the dominant society in order to minimize the problems and pain of being an ethnic minority in America. More culturally sensitive educational systems and educational staff can not only help in that minimization of problems, but educators can also gain in personal understanding and growth. Everyone can come out ahead.

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